

Anniversary Address 2013

'The Pride of Birmingham and an Ornament to England'

by

ANTHONY PEERS

Birmingham Town Hall is not what it purports to be. Whilst it was designed to appear as a classical temple, the building has never been used to worship the gods nor has it ever been a place in which to make sacrifices (Fig. 1). This town hall is absolutely not a temple – neither is it, or ever was it, the place which housed the mayor and the offices of local government. The mid-19th-century boom in town hall construction was spawned by the passing of the Municipal Reform Act in 1835. Birmingham's Town Hall was completed a year before that Act was passed, and it was constructed as a place in which the people of Birmingham could gather for political meetings and to hear performances of music.

The Town Hall is deceptive also in its architectural form. Externally it appears to be a classical temple set upon a high podium. Behind those columns, within the cella wall – as might be expected in a Greek or Roman temple – there is a single open space. However, that space, the Great Room as it was called when the building first opened, extends down within the podium - its floor being at pavement level. In doing this, the design so contravenes a fundamental rule of classical propriety that the ultra-purist might dismiss it as architecture of a lower order. For those able to forgive the designers their abuse of classical strictures and prepared to put up with the fact that the building 'does not do what it says on the tin' – the closer study of Birmingham Town Hall proves rewarding. In several respects it can genuinely be regarded as ground-breaking.

Firstly it survives as a building which, perhaps more than any other in the country, serves to remind us of the achievements of the first Great Reform Act. Prior to the passing of the Act the iniquity of the existing system of political representation was keenly felt in Birmingham. By 1830 this was a hugely influential manufacturing base, its outputs and income invaluable to the nation and its economy. However, it was still only represented in parliament by two county MPs. The fact that nearby Tamworth, Coventry, Warwick, Worcester and Bridgnorth were each represented by two MPs only rubbed salt in the wounds, for the populations of these five places combined was still less than the number of people living in Birmingham. The town's population had good reason to feel aggrieved.

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At this time the political mood was ugly throughout Europe. In July 1830 the Parisians revolted, spawning copycat revolutions elsewhere. The Belgians overthrew their monarchy, whilst in the south-east of England farm labourers burned ricks and smashed threshing machines in the 'Swing Riots'. In October 1831 there were riots in Nottingham, Bristol and Derby. As E. P. Thompson was to note, 'Britain was within an ace of Revolution'.¹ That the country did not slip into such an abyss is in large part due to the efforts of Thomas Attwood, and the Birmingham Political Union. The BPU harnessed the anger of the people by hosting massive rallies. One such, held on 7 May 1832 on New Hall Hill – but 500 yards from where the Town Hall was being constructed – was, according to some reports, attended by as many as 200,000 people (Fig. 2). Never before had the country seen a demonstration of this size. The government could not afford to ignore the clear message it sent and the worst of it, for those opposing political reform, was that the gathered protestors were entirely peaceful. They could not be dismissed as 'the rabble'. Attwood and the peaceable ways of the Birmingham Political Union proved highly influential upon other unions up and down the land. The pressure exerted upon the government proved a game-changer. In the aftermath of the passing of the Act, Lord Durham, a peer in part responsible for drafting the Bill, stated: 'The country owed Reform to Birmingham, and its salvation from revolution'.²

The Town Hall was constructed at the time when the actions of the people of this manufacturing town proved highly influential on the debate in Westminster. The same progressive spirit which saw the people of Birmingham emerge at the forefront of the national campaign for political reform also brought about the construction of the Town Hall: proud emblem of Birmingham and a capacious home for the town's well attended political meetings. There is surely no building in the country which survives as a more potent tangible reminder of the Great Reform Act of 1832.

Secondly, Birmingham Town Hall also has played its part in the history of British music-making. As well as being required for the town's political meetings the Town Hall was specifically designed as a concert hall. The triennial musical festivals held in Birmingham since the 1760s were immensely popular. During the Regency period the town's five day-long festivals had a standing above all equivalent musical events in the United Kingdom. However, through the 1820s there grew concern in Birmingham that the hard-earned reputation of its musical festival might be eclipsed by that of competitor events such as that held in York Minster. Chief amongst the causes for concern in Birmingham were the venues in which the festival was held – St Philip's Cathedral (Thomas Archer, 1710-15) and the Theatre Royal (frontage by Samuel Wyatt, 1780, with interior by Samuel Beasley, 1820). In the immediate aftermath of the 1829 Festival, the *Birmingham Argus* slated St Philip's, where the morning oratorios had been performed, for being 'as inconvenient and ill suited a place for such a purpose as it is possible to conceive'.³

Spearheading the lobbying for the construction of a new concert hall in Birmingham was a tireless campaigner, Joseph Moore. Determined that Birmingham should have a concert hall to compare with the finest in Europe, Moore commissioned, at his own expense, a Mr Bryn to go on tour to record the dimensions of the best performance spaces in Britain and beyond. Moore himself visited the Great Room in the mid-17th-century Town Hall in Amsterdam, which he noted to be 120 feet long, 60 feet wide

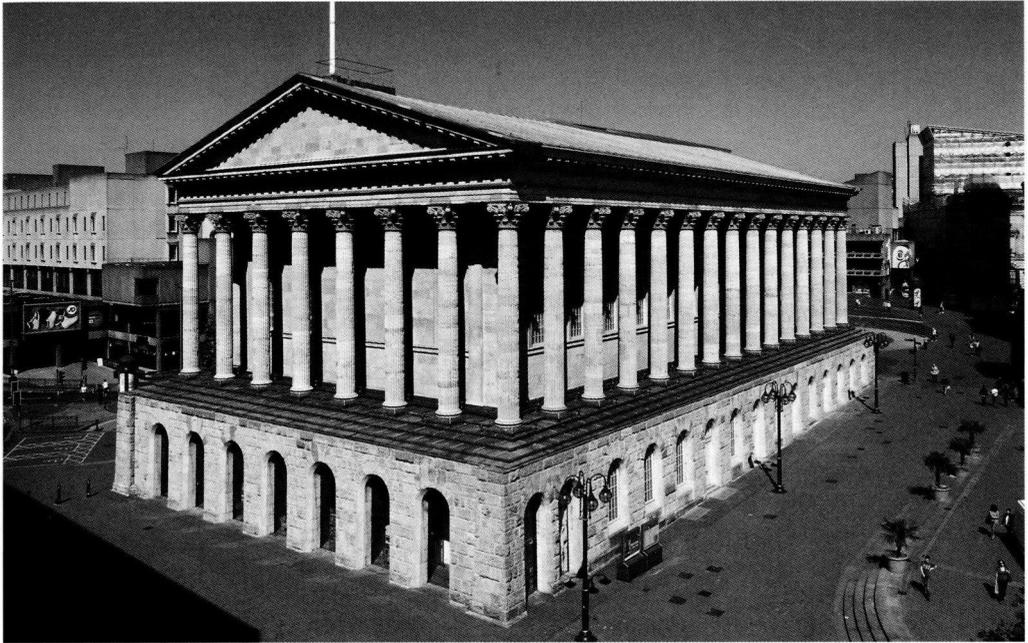


Fig. 1
Birmingham Town Hall, from the south-east.
Photograph, James Davies/English Heritage, 2011

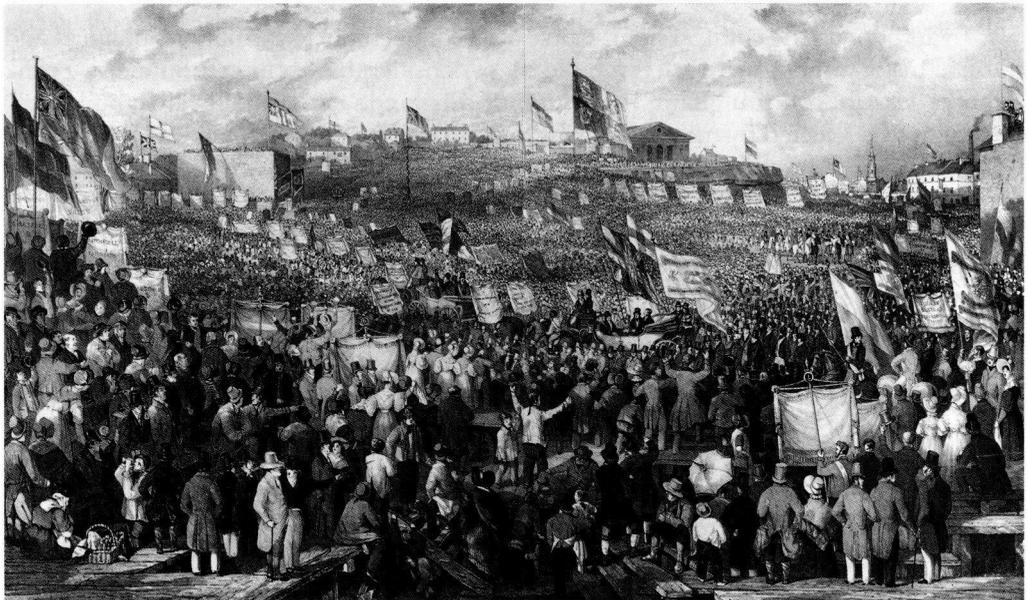


Fig. 2
'The Gathering of the Unions on New Hall Hill, Birmingham', a lithograph worked up by Henry Harris from sketches made during three successive rallies held on New Hall Hill in May 1832.
Courtesy, Birmingham Central Library

and 90 feet high (36.5 x 18.25 x 27.5m).⁴ With this information to hand Moore sought to persuade the Streets Commissioners (the body then controlling highways, planning and redevelopment) that Birmingham's new Town Hall should accommodate a double cubed Great Room, 70 feet wide and 140 feet long, with a floor to ceiling height of 70 feet (21.25 x 42.50 x 21.25m). Moore's task of gaining their approval was a challenging one. Birmingham's principal venue for concerts at this time, the Assembly Rooms in the Royal Hotel, measured just 80 feet long by 33 feet wide (24.5 x 10.0m). However, his persistence won out. At the close of protracted negotiations the Commissioners agreed to the construction of an auditorium with a footprint roughly three and a half times larger than that of the hotel's Assembly Rooms. The Town Hall's Great Room was to be a generous 140 feet long, 65 feet wide and 65 feet from floor to ceiling (42.50 x 19.75 x 19.75m). Whilst the Holywell Music Rooms in Oxford, Saint Cecilia's Hall in Edinburgh and the now lost Hanover Square Rooms and Argyll Rooms in London all pre-dated it, these purpose-built concert venues were diminutive, accommodating only hundreds of concert-goers. Designed to seat 3,000 people, and on occasion squeezing in as many as 12,000, Birmingham Town Hall was Britain's first great purpose-built concert hall (Fig. 3). In the course of its history the Town Hall has played host to some remarkable musical events, none more celebrated than that which took place on 26 August, 1846. On this day the Town Hall hosted one of the great musical occasions of the 19th century – the premier performance of Mendelssohn's *Elijah*. *The Times* reported there to have been no less than eight encores:

The last note of the *Elijah* was drowned in a long-continued and unanimous volley of plaudits, vociferous and deafening. Never was there a more complete triumph – never a more thorough and speedy recognition of a great work of art.⁵

In addition to the cultural significance of its connectivity to the nation's political and musical history, the Town Hall is a building of considerable architectural merit. Frank Salmon describes Birmingham Town Hall as 'England's earliest truly civic building'.⁶ Its design was selected by means of an architectural competition. Such was the prestige of this potential commission that it drew seventy submissions, with designs sent in by architects such as Charles Barry, and from the offices of Soane and Nash. When the Streets Commissioners chose the design for the new public hall in June 1831, they plumped for a building which would convey in its appearance the message that this was a great centre of civic achievement. The competition entry which won favour with the Commissioners was one based in design and style on that of the Temple of Castor and Pollux in the Forum in Rome. The presence of this grand edifice at the heart of the town would, they hoped, encourage inhabitants and visitors alike to think of ancient Rome, the great centre of classical civilisation, and reflect on the comparative achievements of modern day Birmingham.

From the midst of the workshops of this burgeoning manufacturing town was to rise a great 'marble' temple. The competition winning architects, Joseph Hansom and his partner Edward Welch, promised that the Town Hall would become a more striking landmark with each passing year for the Anglesey 'marble' with which it was to be clad would 'gradually become whiter with age'.⁷ Hansom and Welch were both in their twenties when they entered the competition. Neither had been to Italy, but several



Fig. 3

A 'faithful representation' of how the Town Hall's Great Room appeared during a performance at the opening festival. Lithograph by Henry Harris, printed by George Walker and published by Wrightson and Webb (Birmingham 1834).

Courtesy, Birmingham Central Library

recent publications featuring measured survey drawings of the architectural antiquities of Rome provided the young architects with all the detail they might require, such as that illustrated in Figure 4. However, although their submission clearly impressed the Commissioners, the winners' youthfulness proved a singular cause for concern, and a request was made that their drawings be assessed by an architect of established reputation, so Hansom and Welch elected to consult John Soane. He too approved of the design, but he recommended that the order of the proposed building be changed to that of the Temple of Vesta at Tivoli. Hansom and Welch duly reworked their drawings only to be informed, by the Commissioners' architectural advisor, that the order of Castor and Pollux was preferred. Before finally agreeing to award the young architects the commission to direct the building's construction the Commissioners insisted that they agree to stand surety to the appointed contractors. This meant that from the outset the architects were obliged to act like some medieval master masons: whilst the works were underway Hansom hardly ever left the site.

The process of constructing the Town Hall turned out to be fraught with all manner of challenges. Chief amongst the problems was the winning of the Anglesey 'marble'

from the quarry near Beaumaris.⁸ The stone also proved difficult to work and the transportation of it – from the quarry to the shore, then by boat to Runcorn and finally via canal to Birmingham – added significant delays. Whilst the time that it might take to transport the stone on the canal system was quite predictable, again and again work on site was held up on account of ill winds preventing the stone-laden boats from setting sail for Runcorn. The progress of construction was also dogged by several strikes and a major mishap. From an early juncture doubts had been expressed about whether Hansom and Welch's trusses would be able to carry the load of the lead roof covering as well as the weight of the Great Room's decorative plaster ceiling. Of particular concern was the novel 'sandwiching' of timbers to create a tie beam long enough to span the Great Room's breadth of 65 feet (19.75m). Ironically whilst the trusses proved fit for their purpose the problem came when hoisting one of them into position (Fig. 5). The accident occurred when, in lifting the seventh of the ten trusses, a block and tackle broke and one end of the truss fell down into the body of the building. Two men were thrown from the scaffold and later died of their injuries. This disaster shocked the architects and all on site, and work ground to a halt for ten days.

In the end the delays in the programme, combined with the hard-nosed parsimony of the client, resulted in the bankruptcies of both the contractors and the architects. Having had such high hopes that this job would make their reputations, and having worked so hard to try and make it succeed, the failure proved a bitter blow to the architects. Facing financial ruin and a professional humiliation Joseph Hansom and Edward Welch turned on one another and a dispute, played out in correspondence in the *Architectural Magazine*, saw each architect claiming that it was he who was responsible for the design for the Town Hall. The two architects continued to argue over this point – even after their respective deaths the families continued the spat. In 1934, as part of the celebrations to mark the Town Hall's centenary, it was decided to put the matter to rest by installing a plaque upon which would be carved the names of the building's two designers, but unfortunately for Welch, this good idea was poorly executed. Alongside Hansom's name on the commemorative stone was carved the name of 'John Welch'. Poor Edward

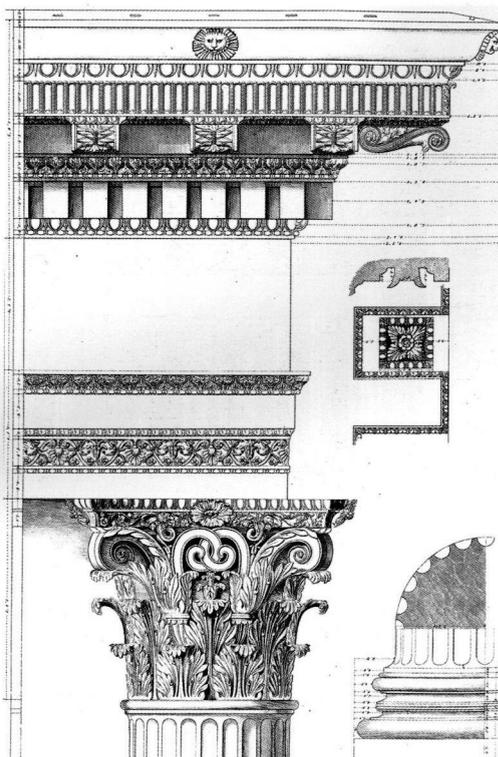


Fig. 4

Temple of Castor and Pollux, Rome, 'The Details of the Order', an engraving from G.L. Taylor and E. Cresy, *The Architectural Antiquities of Rome* (London 1821-22).

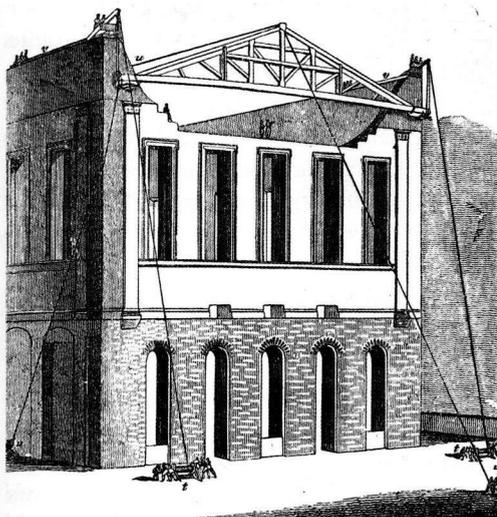


Fig. 5

A truss being winched up to the Town Hall's wall heads, *Architectural Magazine* (1835).
Courtesy, Birmingham Central Library

public rate, from the outset the people of Birmingham regarded the Town Hall as their building. Whilst it was being constructed a commemorative print was engraved and medals struck to enable proud inhabitants to have mementoes of this new emblem of their town. The popularity of these was such that in the aftermath of the opening of the building in October 1834 a special print was engraved to provide a visual record of the appearance of the auditorium during the opening festival (Fig. 3). As the *Preston Chronicle* reported at the time, as well as being 'an ornament to England', the new Town Hall was 'the pride of Birmingham'.⁹ There was huge interest in the building. The local press had nothing but praise, the *Birmingham Journal* declaring this to be 'by far the best music hall in Great Britain, if not in Europe'.¹⁰ The fact that the building had not been entirely completed was momentarily forgotten.



Fig. 6

Town Hall, unfinished stonework on the inward-facing part of the capital at the south-west corner; the volute, damaged whilst being hoisted into position, can be seen to have been dressed ready to receive an indent stone repair. In the hurry to strike the scaffold, this work was left uncompleted.

Photograph, Rodney Melville and Partners

Welch, in the aftermath of the disheartening Town Hall contract, he licked his wounds in Liverpool, patenting a design for a domestic boiler. His former partner went on to be the founding editor of the hugely influential and long-lived journal, *The Builder*. He is also noted as the designer of some fine Catholic churches and he invented the Hansom cab.

In spring 1834, in the wake of the bankruptcies of both the architects and the contractors, the Town Hall construction project was taken on by John Foster, Architect and Surveyor to the Liverpool Corporation. With an injection of funds over and above those to which Hansom and Welch had been restricted, Foster was able to ensure that the Town Hall was built in time for the Triennial Musical Festival of October 1834.

Funded not by the munificence of a local worthy but with monies raised by a

In the rush to get the Town Hall ready in time for the Musical Festival of October 1834 works were left undone. Evidence of this can still be seen today in the incomplete carving on the inward-facing elements of some of the capitals (Fig. 6). There does survive contemporary record too of the fact that at its opening the Town Hall did not appear exactly as depicted in the official commemorative print (Fig. 7). The *Preston Chronicle's* reviewer commented that the Town Hall, with its unfinished pediment, brought to mind a 'fine old Grecian temple. A slight exercise of the imagination converts this into a building partially in ruins, instead of one that has not yet been completed'.¹¹

Bearing in mind the challenges of the contract and the extraordinarily tight budget, it is quite remarkable that by October 1834 the Town Hall had been completed to such an extent as to render it fit to host the scheduled festival. Things would certainly have turned out quite differently had the Streets Commissioners, the unelected body of townsmen who commissioned the building, not been quite so sharp in relation to the project funding. Although it appears that not one of them had any experience in building contracts, most members of the Town Hall Committee were in trade and thus well versed in striking a bargain. For example, in the architectural competition, they more than got their money's worth from their investments towards the prize money, for having eventually selected their chosen design they asked the winning architects to amend their drawings to incorporate elements seen in some of the other submissions. Such sharp practice and tight-fistedness by the client continued through the course of the contract.

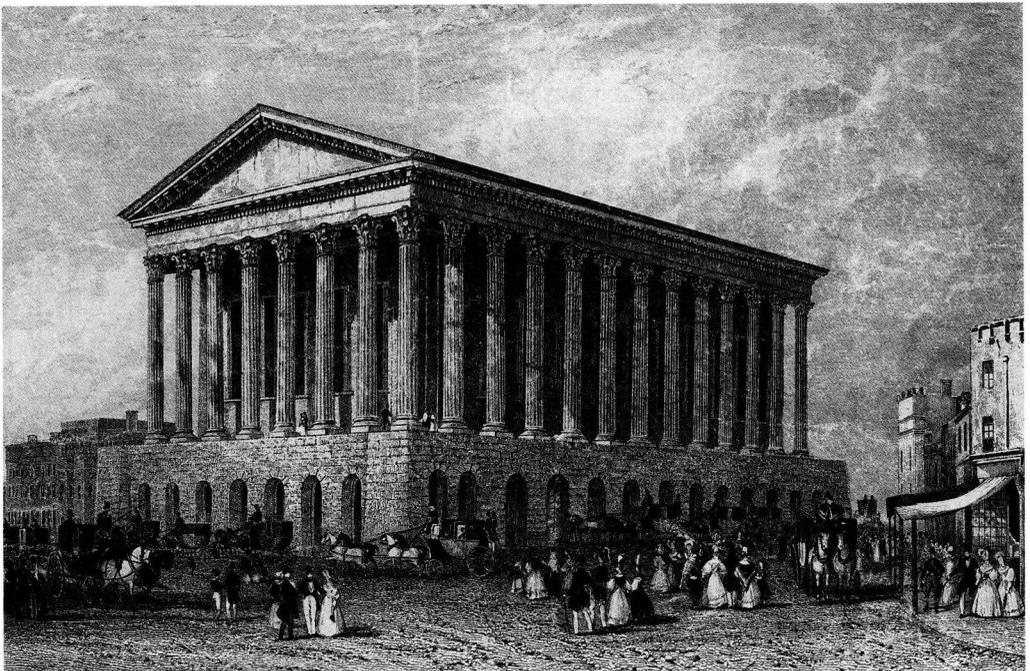


Fig. 7

Memento of the Town Hall and the first festival held in it, engraving of 1834.

Courtesy, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery

With the architects and the contractors all but ruined by the Commissioners' unflinching parsimony, it is all too easy to see the latter as the villains of the piece. However, they were acting on behalf of the people. The funds required for the construction of the Town Hall had to be raised through a public rate, so the budget had to be tight. From our perspective it is interesting to reflect on the thought that if the Town Hall had been commissioned by a less commercially savvy client, the 'pride of Birmingham' would almost certainly never have been commissioned, let alone seen through to completion.

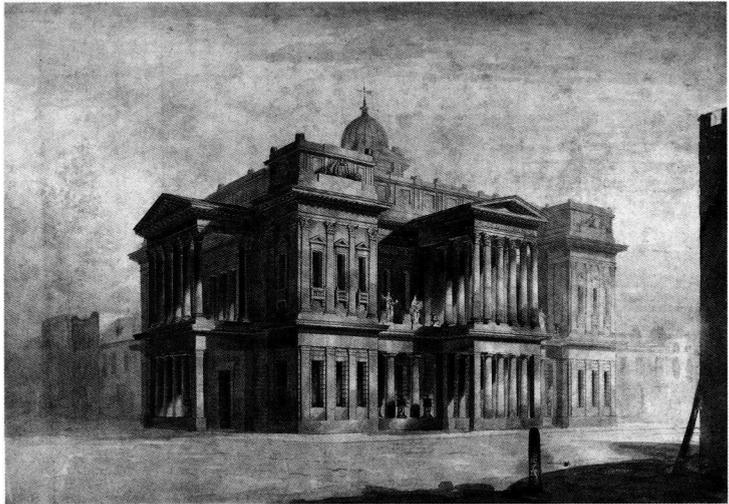


Fig.8

Town Hall design competition, perspective view from John Fallows' entry.
Courtesy, Birmingham Central Library

The architectural competition itself was fraught with potential pit-falls around which the Commissioners successfully negotiated their way. One, a classic of such competitions, was the temptation to fall for the 'too good to be true' submission. Evidence that this ruse was attempted may be observed in the full set of competition drawings, executed by the Birmingham based architect, John Fallows, now archived in Birmingham's Central Library (Fig. 8). Producing designs for an impressive and highly decorative building – which patently could not have been built within the specified budget – this architect chanced his arm, clearly hoping that the competition assessors would be so won over by his beautifully produced presentation drawings that they would disregard all other submissions. Fortunately the Commissioners' native instincts won out. Comparing Fallows' grandiose design with the other more modest proposals, they recognised that it would be impossible to construct such a building within the meagre budget permitted, so he was awarded the second prize: itself a recognition of the fact that they were indeed mightily impressed with his submission. The proposal awarded first prize, even though it was markedly less flamboyant than Fallows' design, proved impossible to complete on time and within budget. It can only be imagined that if the Commissioners had fallen for Fallows' enticing submission, the outcome would have been total failure and disappointment. The process of constructing the Hansom and Welch design for the Town Hall may have been accompanied by delays, a disaster and some over-spend, but the building was completed eventually. This magnificent temple of a building stands as a testament to the collective civic spirit of the people of Birmingham, the Commissioners' thrift and the 'never-say-die' graft and determination of its youthful architects.

There was never any question of the Town Hall's construction being funded by a munificent gesture or even through a public subscription, in contrast to St George's Hall, Liverpool (Harvey Lonsdale Elmes and Charles Cockerell, 1841-54), a sister building which cost nearly ten times more. Furthermore the Birmingham Commissioners had no funds themselves with which to meet the costs of this new building. It is truly remarkable that they were able to achieve all that they did with the meagre sums raised by imposing a six-penny rate on the town's population. Indeed, in the months and years following the Town Hall's completion people came to wonder quite how a building of this size, and grandeur, could have cost so little. The *Birmingham Journal* declared the Town Hall to be 'by far the cheapest building of its magnitude perhaps ever erected'.¹²

In the same month that the Town Hall opened there was a massive fire at the Palace of Westminster. The hastily drawn up plans for the temporary re-fitting of the Palace became the subject of heated discussion, not least about cost. In mid-November the editor of the *Ipswich Herald* contributed to the debate, drawing his readers' attention to the great value of Birmingham's new Town Hall. This 'splendid model of architectural beauty', he wrote, 'quite capable of holding both the assemblies of Lords and Commons, cost less than that for which the country was to pay for "mere temporary accommodation"'.¹³

The importance of the Town Hall to Birmingham and its people is reflected in the fact that, through its history, the building has been altered again and again in order to meet the evolving needs of its users. For instance, in 1837, only three years after the building's completion, the desire to provide additional space for the orchestra led to a scheme in which the organ was dismantled and moved from its primary location into a newly built niche to the north. The pride in the Town Hall was such that when the re-sited organ was unveiled a lithograph was specially commissioned to commemorate the occasion. In the months before the Triennial Musical Festival of 1846, at which Mendelssohn conducted the premiere performance of the *Elijah*, the building's interiors were redecorated by the Craces, the country's most celebrated firm of interior decorators. The fact that the Crace decorations lasted just nine years, being covered over by an even more elaborate scheme in 1855, is symptomatic of the pride taken by one generation after the next in the appearance of this great symbol of Birmingham's civic achievement.

The Town Hall was far from ignored in the Joseph Chamberlain inspired mid-Victorian endeavours – civic works which earned Birmingham the reputation for being 'the best governed city in the world'.¹⁴ Between 1860 and 1890 the setting of this focal building was changed almost out of recognition (Fig. 9). Chamberlain made full use of the Town Hall as a rostrum from which to put his case and was not alone in his desire that those visiting this emblematic building should leave with only favourable impressions. The proud townsfolk had expectations that all necessary improvements should be undertaken to ensure that this landmark civic building remained the pride of Birmingham. For instance, in the mid-1870s the quest to overcome the longstanding issues with overcrowding in the building's circulation spaces threw up a radical scheme. Plans drawn up by local architects Martin and Chamberlain promised to overcome the problem by broadening the corridors either side of the Great Room (Fig. 10).¹⁵ Thankfully this proposal never came to fruition, for in moving the external podia walls outward by nine feet (2.75m) the 'great east and west skirts' would have unbalanced the building's proportions and totally compromised its visual appeal.



Fig. 9

Birds-eye view of Birmingham town centre, detail, from *The Graphic*, 4 September 1886. In this handsome record of Birmingham in its Victorian heyday, the Town Hall can be seen in its position on the southern side of the newly formed Chamberlain Place. To the west (bottom right) stands the Reference Library (1864-65, E.M. Barry exterior, W. Martin interior) and to the east (left centre) the Council House (1874-85, to Yeoville Thomason's designs); these public buildings took their stylistic lead from the Town Hall. To the north of Chamberlain Place (bottom left) is Mason College (1875, to J. A. Cossins' design) and in Chamberlain Place itself is the prominent Chamberlain Memorial Fountain (1880, to J.H. Chamberlain's design).

Courtesy, Birmingham Central Library

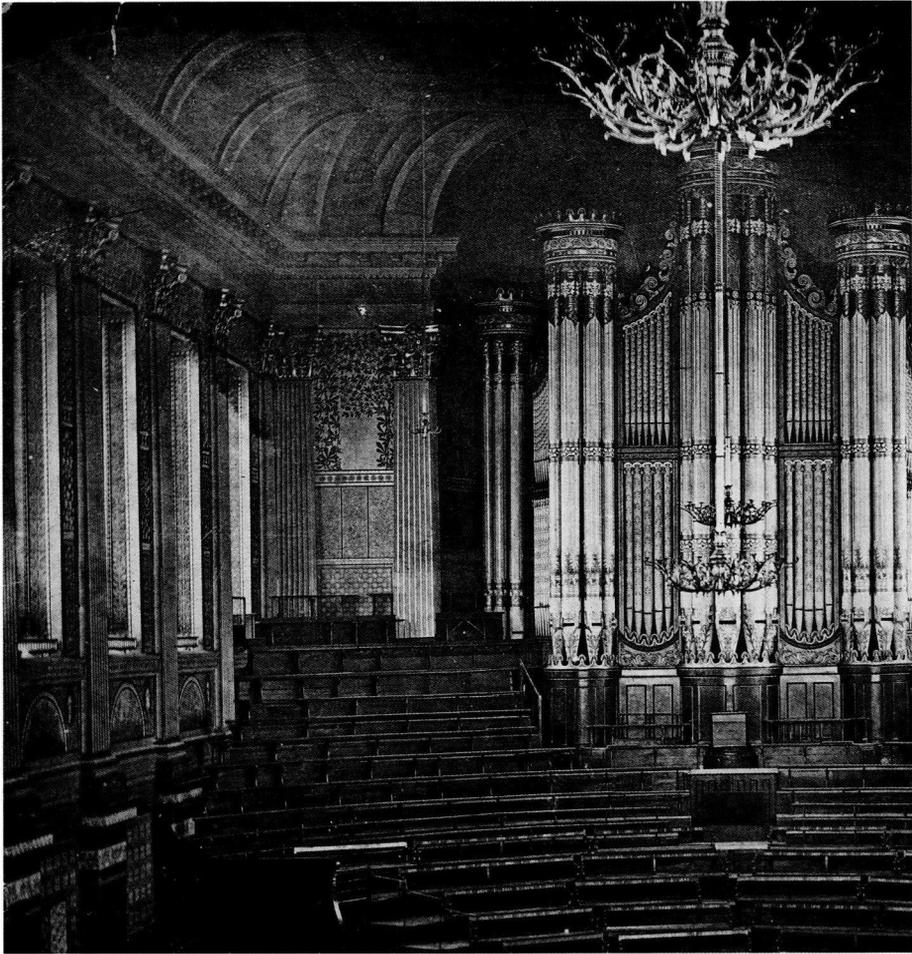


Fig. 11

Town Hall, the Great Room, detail from a photograph taken between 1876 and 1891, which reveals something of the elaborateness its High Victorian decorative scheme.

Courtesy, Birmingham Central Library

popular. Through charming understatement, the *Daily Post's* commentator noted that 'in introducing a style of decoration altogether new to Birmingham, and original in its application to such a building as the Town Hall, the designer essayed a bold stroke'.¹⁷

No less than four major schemes were undertaken during Queen Victoria's reign to improve and redecorate the Town Hall. Having directed the 1837 works to relocate the organ, Charles Edge was commissioned again in 1848 to mastermind a programme of works which included the excavation of ground beneath the Great Room to create a new room 50 feet by 90 feet (15m x 27.5m). In this scheme the Town Hall also at last realised the form originally envisaged for it by Hansom and Welch. In the 1830 competition brief the Streets Commissioners had provided the wrong site dimensions. The upshot had

been that Hansom and Welch had had to make a major compromise, paring down the north and west parts of their design to ensure that the building could be fitted on to the site. With the land to the west and north now available, in the scheme of 1848-50 the western podium was completed to match that on the east, and the podium, columns and pediment at the north end of the building were built to render the Town Hall's peripteral arrangement complete. Following on from Martin and Chamberlain's scheme of the mid-1870s the last great programme of works undertaken to the Town Hall in the 19th century was that overseen by Cossins and Peacock in 1891. These local architects made major improvements to the entrance foyer, reconfigured the stairs at both the north and south ends of the building and installed electric lighting throughout.

Another substantial scheme of works was in the process of being planned at the outbreak of the First World War. Pressed into service, not least as a recruiting office, the much needed works to the Town Hall were put on hold. As funds, efforts and lives were being expended in Flanders the building's condition deteriorated. After the war the desire for change and improvement was such that many considered that the best way of meeting the peoples' requirements would be if the tired old Town Hall were demolished and a new civic hall constructed. Thwarted by lack of funds, these plans came to nought. Whilst it might have avoided the wreckers' ball, the mid-1920s scheme of works was far from conservative. In their endeavours to render the building fit for mid-20th-century use, those planning this bold scheme elected to remove the original gallery and balconies for replacement with a two tiered arrangement which promised to accommodate an extra

500 seats (Fig. 12). The original ceiling, adjudged to be structurally unsound, was removed, its place being taken by a plaster ceiling of modish appearance (Fig. 13). The flamboyant form of this new ceiling was dreamt up by Sir Charles Allom, a man who made his name designing the interiors of ocean-going liners.

In spite of all the work undertaken to the Town Hall in 1927, the hope that the city might have a new civic hall never went away. This long held aspiration was eventually realised with the opening of Symphony Hall in 1991. Within five years the tired old Town Hall was closed to the public. The thoughts of some - that the problem of this old building might be removed through demolition - were this time in vain. As far back as

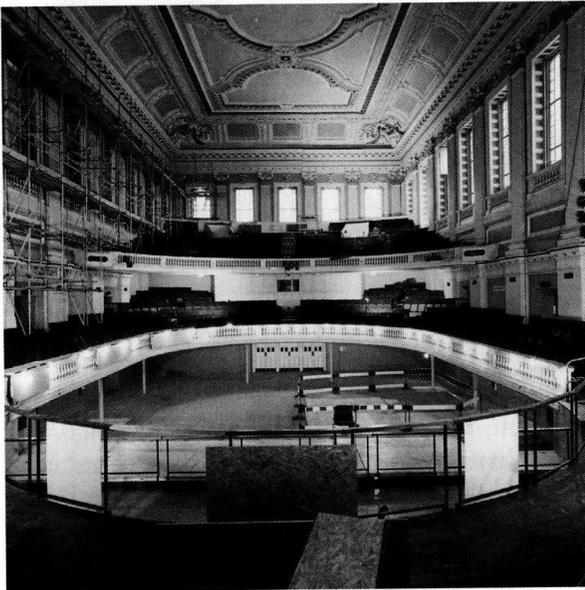


Fig. 12

Town Hall, the Great Room, the south end photographed before commencement of the works of 2005-07.

Photograph, Gareth Lewis, 2003; courtesy, Birmingham City Council



Fig. 13

Town Hall, the Great Room, mid-1920s plasterwork at a corner of the ceiling, designed by Charles Allom; the highly decorative, almost theatrical plasterwork combines Roman symbols with Birmingham's coat-of-arms.

Photograph, James Davies/English Heritage, 2011

1958 the Town Hall had been designated a Grade I listed building. As the City Council struggled to find a workable and affordable solution for the disused Town Hall it faced an increasingly vociferous campaign. Significant numbers were of the view that this building belonged to the people and that the local authority was merely its custodian.

After a couple of false starts the council heeded the guidance of the newly founded Heritage Lottery Fund and a realistic and workable plan emerged. The Heritage Lottery Fund's offer of ten million pounds, later increased to thirteen-and-a-half million, gave an impetus to the proposed scheme from which there was to be no turning back. The most significant work of the scheme to revitalise and repair the Town Hall was the removal of the inter-war galleries and balconies for replacement with balconies and a single gallery of much the same form as had been built in the early 1830s (Fig. 14). The process of removing the upper gallery of 1927 revealed the full height of the Great Room's southern windows, and the auditorium's acoustics were transformed by doing away with the cavernous spaces, which had been a feature of the Allom designed galleries and their extra deep balconies.

In addition to the considerable efforts made to render the Town Hall fit for 21st-century use, a major programme of repair was undertaken to the building's historic fabric. As Hansom had predicted, the Anglesey 'marble' had indeed become whiter with age, but the stonework had also deteriorated, requiring extensive works of repair and replacement. The building's appearance was greatly improved through the replacement of

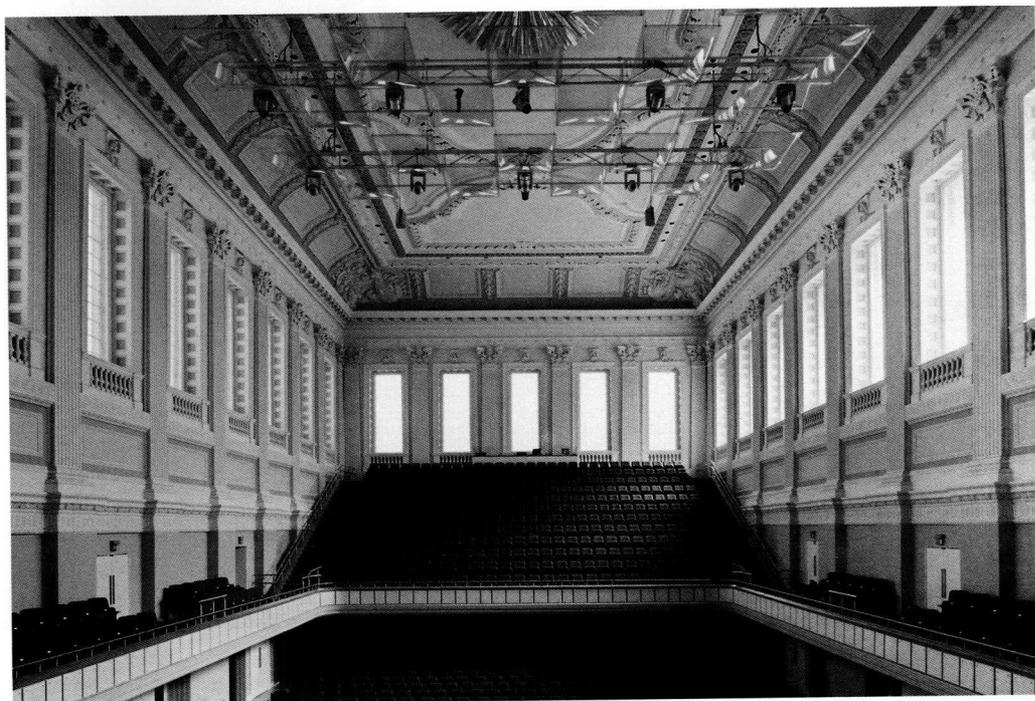


Fig. 14

Town Hall, the Great Room, the south end after completion of the 2004-07 works.

Photograph, James Davies/English Heritage, 2011

the defective 1970s tin roof with leadwork to match that with which the Town Hall had originally been covered. The task of faithfully recreating the form of the early-1830s leadwork was made possible through the survival of early record drawings.

As had been the case with the roof, the decision as to the best means by which to make the podium watertight was informed by documentary research as well as fabric analysis. The archival record told of the fact that from the outset the podium's exposed Belper stone platform failed to keep the rainwater from seeping through to the spaces beneath. In 1855 drastic measures had been taken to remedy the problem – a coating of asphalt had been applied (Fig. 15). Whilst this additional covering might have initially checked the water ingress, the asphalt introduced complications



Fig. 15

Town Hall, record photograph showing the podium's asphalt covering, together with an area where the primary Belper stone has been exposed to view.

Photograph, Gareth Lewis, 2003; courtesy, Birmingham City Council



Fig. 16

Town Hall, the podium's new leadwork covering.

Photograph, James Davies/English Heritage, 2011

of its own for over the decades it blistered and cracked. With entirely dry interiors an absolute requirement, in 2003 the decision was taken to remove the asphalt and lay a carefully detailed lead roof covering upon the Belper stones (Fig. 16). Whilst clearly making an impact on the building's external appearance, this assertive alteration has, for the first time in the building's history, provided damp-free spaces within the podium.

Amongst the many discoveries made whilst the works were underway, of particular interest were the short stubs of bronze rod and bar found on top of each face of every capital (see Fig. 6). This metalwork once served to support stone rosettes. Instead of carving these decorative elements into the abaci (as can be seen on the Temple of Castor and Pollux, Fig. 4), Hansom

and Welch utilised bronze supports to allow the rosettes to fly out and over the helices, rendering them clear to view from way down below. From the photographic record in the archives, it can be observed that by the 1930s a significant number of these exposed elements had become loose and had fallen (Fig. 17). It was in the mid-1950s that the decision was taken



Fig. 17

Town Hall, inter-war photograph in which the capitals' rosettes can be seen.

Courtesy, English Heritage

to render the building safer by taking a hacksaw to the bronze supports and consigning all of the decayed rosettes to the skip. Unfortunately the discovery of the severed bronze stubs came too late on in the building contract for any hope to be realisable of reintroducing a rosette or two. Deadlines loomed and all budgets were spoken for.

Having been closed for over a decade, and further to a scheme which cost thirty-five million pounds, the fully repaired and refitted Town Hall was reopened to the public in October 2007. At the opening ceremony there were a great number of people – masons, joiners, labourers, architects, engineers, contracts managers, amongst others – all of whom rightly felt a keen sense of pride at their achievement. The contract had come in on time and on budget with not one major injury to report. I rather hope that the invitation to the opening ceremony was also sent to the unsung heroes of the piece, the handful of members of the Town Hall Millennium Group. Through the late 1990s these individuals campaigned tirelessly, and pretty effectively, to encourage the City Council to bring the then redundant Town Hall back into use. That their campaign was well supported – their petition received over 10,000 signatures – is testament to the high regard in which this great emblem of Birmingham is held.

With its decade of disuse behind it the Town Hall is now back doing what it was designed to do – serving the people of Birmingham. Under the management of Performances Birmingham, the organisation which runs Symphony Hall, the Town Hall is in good hands. Long may it remain 'The pride of Birmingham and an ornament to England'.

NOTES

- 1 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (rev. edn, Harmondsworth 1968), 898.
- 2 A. Briggs, 'Thomas Attwood and the Economic Background of the Birmingham Political Union' *Cambridge Historical Journal* IX/2, (London 1948), 190, quote Mrs H. Grote, *Personal Life of George Grote* (London 1849), 78.
- 3 *Birmingham Argus*, November 1829, 175-6.
- 4 The editor is responsible for inserting the metric measurements, equivalent to the nearest 0.25m.
- 5 *The Times*, 27 August 1846.
- 6 F. Salmon, *Building on Ruins: the Rediscovery of Rome and English Architecture* (Aldershot 2000), 22.
- 7 E. Welch, 'A Descriptive Account, Accompanied by plans, Elevations, Sections Etc of the Birmingham New Town Hall', *Architectural Magazine* (January 1835), 20.
- 8 The 'Anglesey marble' with which the Town Hall was clad was a gift to Birmingham from the owner of the quarry, Sir Richard Williams-Bulkeley MP, a keen supporter of the political reform movement. Technically a carboniferous limestone, the stone from Williams-Bulkeley's quarry was referred to as 'a marble' at this time on account of the fact that it could be polished.
- 9 *Preston Chronicle*, 18 October 1834.
- 10 *Birmingham Journal*, 11 October 1834.
- 11 *Preston Chronicle*, 18 October 1834.
- 12 *Birmingham Journal*, 30 August 1834.
- 13 *Ipswich Herald*, 15 November 1834.
- 14 Description of Birmingham first penned in 1890 by an American journalist, Julian Ralph: see R. Ward, *City-State and Nation: Birmingham's Political History 1830-1940* (Chichester 2005), 74.
- 15 The architect, J.H. Chamberlain, of Martin & Chamberlain, was no relation to Joseph Chamberlain, the politician.
- 16 L. Tait, 'On the Ventilation of Public Buildings', lecture of 9 March 1882, published in the *Birmingham Philosophical Society Transactions*, 110-11.
- 17 *Birmingham Daily Post*, 25 July 1876.